

LESSON 1

JAHILIYYAH: THE DAYS OF IGNORANCE

[It was a Monday morning of 12 Rabi I (20 April 571)¹, nearly fourteen hundred years ago, Rasulullah, *Salla Allahu alaihi wa Sallam*² (may Peace and Blessings be upon him), was born in Makkah. Makkah was, and still is, a very important city of Arabia. It was regarded as a holy city by all the Arabs. In it was situated Kabah, the main house of worship for all the Arabs.

Kabah was built by Prophet Ibrahim, *Alaihi al Salam*³ (peace be upon him), and Prophet Ismail, *Alaihi al Salam* (peace be upon him), for the worship of Allah. These two prophets, like all the other prophets, preached the religion of Islam. They are regarded by the Arabs as their ancestors. Most Arabs are their children; others became their children by believing in their teachings. For many years after the death of Ibrahim (A) and Ismail (A), Kabah remained a place of pilgrimage for all Muslims. They came to Kabah from all around Arabia to worship Allah.

Slowly the descendants of Ibrahim (A) and Ismail (A) forgot about the pure religion of Islam. They started *Kufr*. *Kufr* is being ungrateful to Allah, and worshipping idols and images in place of Allah. Some of them believed that their gods and goddesses shared Allah's power. This kind of belief is called *Shirk*. It is the greatest sin in the eyes of Allah.

Kabah remained a center of worship, the holy temple for all the Arabs. It housed their three hundred and sixty-five idols. Arabs gathered in Makkah each year for pilgrimage. Some of them even walked around Kabah naked. There was a big fair where they gambled and got drunk and consulted sorcerers and magicians for their future plans.

Few Arabs still remembered the teachings of Islam and worshipped only Allah. They were called *hanif*. Other Arabs who did not like their idol-worshipping religion became Christians or Jews.

¹According to some accounts Rasulullah(S) was born on 9 Rabi I.

²Allah says in the Quran, "Indeed Allah and His angels send their blessings upon the Prophet, O believers, ask Allah's blessings upon him and salute him with worthy salutation." *al-Ahzab* 33:56. In our book an (S) after the name of Rasulullah is an abbreviation of *Salla Allahu alaihi wa Sallam* to remind us to send salutations.

³We ask for Allah's blessings for the prophets and angels by these words. An (A) after the name of a prophet or an angel reminds readers to ask Allah's blessings upon him.

Makkah was an independent city. It was ruled by the tribe of Quraish. Banu Hashim, the family of Hashim (Hashim was a famous Quraish chief), was caretaker of Kabah. Service to pilgrims and care of Kabah was a great honor. Quraish were respected all over Arabia because of their services to the pilgrims and responsibility for the care and maintenance of Kabah.

The land around Makkah was mostly barren. There was no agriculture. Most of the Quraish were business people. They sent two caravans for trade each year. In winter their caravan went to the South and in summer it went to the North. Though robbing caravans was a normal way of life in Arabia, the caravan of the Quraish was respected by all and no one dared to rob it. The custody of Kabah made them rich; it gave them both national respect and a life of peace.

The Quraish, instead of being thankful to Allah, became an insolent people. They believed they were superior to others. They oppressed the poor, the slaves, the orphans, and the widows. They cheated in business. They buried their daughters alive and mistreated their women. Women had no rights in Arab society. A man could take as many wives as he wished and divorce them at will. Women had no right to inherit property.

Arabs were divided into clans and tribes. Clans and smaller tribes were allied with bigger tribes. Only a few tribes lived in the city but most of them wandered in search of pasture and water. Arabia was mostly a vast desert and had only a few oases. The bedouin Arabs loved to wander in the desert. They were very proud of their freedom.

Each tribe was ruled by a chief called the *Shaikh*. He was generally the oldest member of the tribe. The Arabs were fond of their language. Poets were especially respected for their poetic compositions. Good speakers and story tellers were held in honor. It was a matter of great distinction to speak the pure Arabic language. The desert tribes spoke beautiful Arabic. The Makkan Arabs sent their children to live with the desert Arabs to learn their language.

Arabs had forgotten not only *Tawhid*, the belief in one God, but also most of the good things that Ibrahim (A) and Ismail (A) had taught them. The tribes fought against each other all the time. They believed in retaliation and revenge. They would never forgive or forget. So the tribal wars continued for years and years. The tribes would kill their enemies, plunder their properties, and take possession of their children and women.

Arabs also had some good qualities. They were a brave people. They were very generous. They treated their guests kindly. They usually kept their promises. They were frank and told what they believed. They were ready to fight for their beliefs. However, without right beliefs and high moral standards these good characteristics alone could not make the Arabs a great people.

The religious situation in the rest of the world was not much different from the one in Arabia. Allah had sent His prophets and guides to all nations to guide people to the path of true faith of Islam. The prophets taught about *Tawhid* (Allah's Oneness) and moral life. Like the Arabs, people in the world who had received Allah's revelation were far away from the pure religion of Islam. They changed the teachings of their prophets. The *kufr* and the *shirk* were common among them. In their evil ways they were like the Arabs.

In the world there were many nations and tribes. People of each race believed that they were superior to other people. The strong nations fought and suppressed the weaker nations.

The Arab world was surrounded by two powerful empires. In the East was the Iranian Empire ruled by the Khusraws. Their religion was Zoroastrianism. The Zoroastrians worshipped fire and believed in the dualism of good and evil spirits. That means that the power of good and evil are equally strong and are struggling against each other.

In the West was the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire ruled by the Caesars. Their religion was Christianity. The Christians believed in the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity means that God consists of three persons; God the Father, Isa (Jesus) the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Christians believed in the divine nature of Prophet Isa (Jesus), whom they accepted as the only begotten Son of God.

The Iranian and Byzantine empires had constant wars between them. The Arabs' lands lay in between the two empires. Each of the two empires controlled many Arab lands. The Arabs had no strong state of their own. They were politically weak and socially divided.

The world was waiting for someone to come: to remove the evils of the world; to teach mankind *Tawhid*, the worship of One and only One God, Allah; and to unite the warring nations into one brotherhood, the *Ummah* (community) of Islam.

Long before the birth of Rasulullah (S), Allah's many revelations to mankind spoke about his coming. Every prophet in his lifetime had received

from Allah the good news of Rasulullah's coming. Many prophets, knowing that the Muslim *Ummah* is dear to Allah, even desired to be born in the *ummah* of Muhammad (S). The time had come when Allah would send His last prophet to teach mankind His perfect religion, Islam, and give His final revelation, the Quran, to His prophet.

Points of review:

1. The descendants of Ibrahim (A) forgot the pure religion of Islam and started *Kufr* and *Shirk*.
2. The Quraish tribe ruled in Makkah. They regarded themselves superior to others.
3. Other religious communities also corrupted the pure revelations. The world was waiting for Allah's final revelation.

Words to remember:

Custody, dualism, *Hanif*, insolent, *Kufr*, retaliation, *Shirk*, *Tawhid*, Zoroastrianism.

Quranic study

Early Makkan *Surahs* speak about the conditions of Arabian society. Study the following *Surahs*:

1. *al-Fajr* 89:17-20; *al-'Alaq* 96:6-13; *al-Takathur* 102; *al-Ma'un* 107

See what characteristics of the Arabs they criticise.

2. The Quran says the religion of Ibrahim was not Judaism, Christianity, or paganism but Islam. Read the following:

i. *al-Baqarah* 2:130-135; ii. *Ali Imran* 3:67; iii. *al-Nahl* 16:120-123